

Benson-Ames Alliance Progress Report: 2005-2011



Community Spirit in Action.

November 2011

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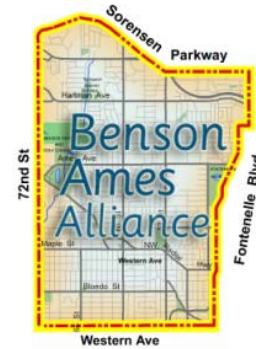
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The Benson-Ames Alliance is striving to become a sustainable community that actively seeks a balance between its built and natural environments.

www.benson-ames.org

History

The Benson-Ames Alliance, Omaha's first city-sponsored alliance, was formed in September 2005 to plan for and implement the revitalization of the Benson-Ames area in northwest Omaha. It is bordered by Western Avenue on the south, Sorensen Parkway on the north, Saddle Creek Road/Fontenelle Boulevard on the east and 72nd Street on the west.



The alliance concept, outlined in Omaha's Urban Design Element, empowers smaller sectors of the city united by a common geography – neighborhoods, business nodes, schools, churches and civic groups - to band together and take an active role in the future of their community.

Omaha by Design partnered with the City of Omaha to create the Benson-Ames Alliance so it could serve as a model for future alliance development throughout the metro. At present, there are three additional alliances, all of which are managed by the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce – Destination Midtown, the North Omaha Development Project and the South Omaha Development Project.

Public and private donations in the amount of \$205,037 were raised to fund the Benson-Ames Alliance development process and revitalization plan. In November 2006, the Omaha City Council unanimously approved the Benson-Ames Alliance Plan, which sets forth a new framework of principles for future development and redevelopment projects, paying special attention to the design of commercial centers that blend retail, residential and office elements to achieve balanced and truly livable neighborhoods. Additional sections of the plan address transportation, housing and public space issues.

At present, the Benson-Ames Alliance is home to nine neighborhood associations – Ames-Benson, Benson, Clairmont Heights, Cole Creek, Country Club Community Council, Fontenelle View, Fort Redman, Hartman Avenue and Metcalfe-Harrison. The newest neighborhood association – Cole Creek – formed in 2009 as the result of The Cole Creek Project (www.colecreek.org) in the Ames sector of the alliance.

Structure

Omaha by Design has served as the project manager of the Benson-Ames Alliance since its inception in 2005. In January 2007, Omaha by Design established the Benson-Ames Alliance Steering Council and Executive Committee to oversee the group's efforts.

The current executive committee consists of Troy Arthur, Bank of the West, steering council chair; Andrew Rainbolt, Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, chair of the Business Development Committee; Ann Hosford, Metcalfe-Harrison Neighborhood Association, chair of the Neighborhood Affairs Committee; and Liz Cornish, Outward Bound-Omaha, chair of the Social Services Committee. Committee membership extends

beyond the steering council into the greater alliance community, furthering the grassroots nature of the organization.

The council - comprised of business and civic volunteers, city department representatives and Omaha by Design staff - meets the second Wednesday of every other month at The Omaha Home for Boys from 11:45am to 1:00pm. These meetings are open to any interested member of the alliance community.

Early on in the steering council's history, its members set a goal of becoming a sustainable community that actively seeks a balance between its built and natural environments. This philosophy is at the core of all alliance projects and activities.

Milestones

Since the organization's founding in 2005, Omaha by Design has helped the Benson-Ames Alliance:

- Establish and maintain an operating structure to guide its future growth and development
- Launch two major projects (the Cole Creek Project and the Maple Street Corridor Project) representing a nearly **\$7.6 million investment** in the area
- Launch the Prairie in the Park project, a pilot that is introducing the prairie aesthetic to appropriate parcels of city park property throughout Omaha
- Secure **\$1.38 million in future city funding** for the implementation of the first two phases of The Maple Street Corridor Project
- Secure **\$265,174.06 in grants and contributions** in addition to the city's contribution of \$227,750.00
- Equip the Benson business community with new tools to execute the streetscape design component of The Maple Street Corridor Project (creation of a new tax increment financing district in downtown Benson, creation of an expanded and refocused Benson Business Improvement District)
- Manage 120+ volunteers engaged in the execution of B-AA activities
- Evolve into a **credible civic clearinghouse** for groups that wish to partner on community projects, especially those related to sustainability

Accomplishments

Projects

The Cole Creek Project

- This \$1.6 million stormwater demonstration pilot project is located in the Ames sector of the alliance. It is the first to follow the City of Omaha's Urban Design Element recommendation that calls for transforming the Papio Creek waterways into a citywide public park and recreation system. The project is a



partnership of the City of Omaha Department of Public Works; the City of Omaha Department of Parks, Recreation and Public Property; Roncalli Catholic High School; Douglas County; Omaha by Design; the Benson-Ames Alliance; Big Muddy Workshop; Hayes Environmental L.L.C.; Lamp, Rynearson & Associates; and Olsson Associates. It is funded by the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality and the Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District. The goals are to stabilize the creek, improve its water quality and enhance the recreational use of nearby Orchard Park. The community outreach component of the project is designed to engage homeowners, neighborhood associations, business associations and students in understanding their role in the local water cycle and incorporating green solutions into their daily routines. The construction and planting components of the project are now completed, and a “wrap party” will be held in the spring of 2012 at the project site. The outreach component of the project is entering phase two with a focus on bringing the Papio Creek waterways transformation message to the broader Omaha community and region. Plans are under way to establish a “Cole Creek Adopt a Stream Team” in collaboration with Nathan Hale Middle School and other entities surrounding the project site.

The Maple Street Corridor Project

- In June 2007, the Benson-Ames Alliance Steering Council selected downtown Benson as its first priority for revitalization. In August 2008, the alliance launched The Maple Street Corridor Project, a collaborative formed to revitalize Maple Street in downtown Benson from Northwest Radial Highway to 64th Street. It also focuses on Military Avenue from Maple Street to Northwest Radial Highway. The project is a partnership of the Benson-Ames Alliance, the Benson Business Association, the Benson Neighborhood Association, the City of Omaha Departments of Planning and Public Works, and Omaha by Design. It includes three components: a \$6.2 million streetscape design developed by RDG Planning & Design that focuses on function and aesthetics; a downtown Benson housing and retail market analysis conducted by Houseal Lavigne Associates of Naperville, Ill.; and a community branding initiative conducted by Rebel Interactive that was designed to spark civic pride and investment in redevelopment opportunities (www.bensonbeat.com). The first component of the streetscape design slated for implementation is the creation of an east gateway to Maple Street in downtown Benson where Maple diverges from Northwest Radial Highway. The \$500,000 project is included in the City of Omaha’s Capital Improvement Program for transportation-related enhancements. Construction is scheduled to commence in 2012. Funding for a second component of the streetscape design plan, an \$880,000 northwest gateway to the Benson business district where Northwest Radial Highway and 63rd Street converge, is included in the city’s Capital Improvement Program



budget for 2014-15. In December 2010, management of www.bensonbeat.com was turned over to the community. As of fall 2011, plans are under way to launch a new, community-driven Benson web site.

Creation of New Tax Increment Financing District

- The Benson-Ames Alliance spearheaded a push to create a tax increment financing district in downtown Benson that corresponds with the boundaries of The Maple Street Corridor Project. The Omaha City Council approved the creation of this district on Jan. 26, 2010.

Expansion/Reorganization of the Benson Business Improvement District

- In 2009, the Benson-Ames Alliance hired a part-time consultant to help the Benson Business Improvement District expand its current boundaries and refocus its priorities on projects that will improve the economic vitality, aesthetic appeal and sustainable nature of downtown Benson. The Omaha City Council, on a 7-0 vote Nov. 23, 2010, green lighted the Benson Business Improvement District's plans to expand its boundaries, update its assessment formula, add two new board members (appointed by the mayor) to the existing five and begin implementing its strategic work plan, which focuses on cleaning and maintenance, lighting and security, signage and landscaping. The return of holiday lighting to Maple Street in 2010 was the first of their efforts, with help from the Benson Neighborhood and Benson Business associations. After the Nov. 23 vote, the Benson Business Improvement District hired the consultant on a part-time basis (with its own funds) to help manage the group's efforts as it moves forward.

Prairie in the Park Project

- Benson Park in the Benson-Ames Alliance is the site of a test plot for the Prairie in the Park project, which was launched in the spring of 2011. Last fall, Pass the Potatoes – a virtual town hall event sponsored by the Environment Omaha initiative – invited anyone interested in Omaha to submit ideas for improving the sustainability of the city. During a 10-week period that ended Oct. 1, users submitted more than 100 ideas in five areas. Following the idea submission period for each area, the public was asked to improve upon the ideas of others and then vote for their favorite idea. At the conclusion of the online outreach effort, a panel convened by Omaha by Design and city officials reviewed the top ideas in each category – as determined by the event's online voting process – for potential implementation in 2011. The idea selected for implementation was submitted by Zach Fergus, a native of Omaha. His idea – introducing the prairie aesthetic into public parks and properties – was among the most popular in the natural environment area. The review panel, in consultation with the parks department, has developed a two-acre urban prairie test plot in Benson Park. A project fund has been established with the Omaha Parks Foundation for those who would like to make a donation. Once completed, this project will serve as a

model for introducing native plantings throughout the Omaha park system and in private developments as well.

Establishment of GIS web site

- The Benson-Ames Alliance has added a GIS web site to its web presence. Geographic information systems (GIS) integrate hardware, software and data for capturing, managing, analyzing and displaying all forms of geographically referenced information. This web site pertains to the geographic area bound by Sorensen Parkway on the north, Western Avenue on the south, Saddle Creek Road/Fontenelle Boulevard on the east and 72nd Street on the west. It provides access to the information contained in the Benson-Ames Alliance Plan, a guide for revitalizing this historic sector of Omaha, in an easy-to-use format.

Establishment of new neighborhood association

- The Benson-Ames Alliance spearheaded a push to create a new neighborhood association in the area surrounding Orchard Park, the site of The Cole Creek Project. The Cole Creek Neighborhood Association was established in the summer of 2009. Its boundaries are 60th Street on the east, 72nd Street on the west, Sorensen Parkway on the north and Camden Avenue on the south. Hartman Elementary School serves as the association's hub.

Benson Free Space

- The Benson-Ames Alliance Finance/Development Committee launched *Benson Free Space* in the spring of 2009. Entrepreneurs and community groups were invited to submit applications for the use of 2,000 square feet of retail space on Maple Street free of charge for 30 days. The project was designed to draw attention to the available retail/business space in downtown Benson. The winning application was submitted by Omaha artist Sally Lansdale, who creates unique hand-painted furniture.

Big Green Garage Sale

- The Benson-Ames Alliance hosted its first Big Green Garage Sale May 22, 2010. This project grew out of the alliance's renewed focus on neighborhood involvement in 2010. All those who live, work and play in the alliance area were encouraged to have a garage sale on that date. Those who did so were able to advertise their individual sale on www.biggreengaragesale.com free of charge. They also received a reusable garage sale sign to help draw street and sidewalk traffic to their event. All sale holders were encouraged to donate a percentage of their proceeds to a local nonprofit. The technology and event infrastructure is in place to hold future sales pending neighborhood interest.

Related Activities

The Benson-Ames Alliance has evolved into a credible civic clearinghouse for groups that wish to partner on community projects, especially those related to sustainability.

The Benson Mural Project

- Started in 2009, this project was designed to serve as a catalyzing activity for beautifying the alleys of downtown Benson, which serve as a gateway to commerce. It is sponsored by the Benson Business Association, the Benson-Ames Alliance, Omaha by Design, Art Omaha and a group of volunteers from Leadership Omaha Class 31. Two murals were completed in 2009, and an additional two murals were completed in 2010.



Bike/Walk! Benson

- Started in the fall of 2010, this project is recruiting a group of Benson area elementary schools to participate in Activate Omaha's Safe Routes to School program, which maps out safe cycling and walking routes to schools and other nearby destinations (libraries, community centers, etc.). The impetus for the neighborhood push comes from Douglas County Putting Prevention to Work, a grant-based community initiative designed to create a physical and cultural environment that supports people in eating healthy foods and being physically active any time, any place. Neighborhoods surrounding the schools have been canvassed to inventory the physical environment and identify potential barriers that impact bike and foot traffic. Walk/bike audits were then conducted to identify and map suggested neighborhood routes that lead to the schools. The mapping is supported by appropriate directional signage at key points along the routes, the installation of additional bike racks where needed and educational offerings to improve bike skills and safety practices.

The Benson High School Rain Garden Initiative

- This initiative (www.wearelivinggreen.com) is a collaboration between the City of Omaha, Omaha by Design, Benson High School, the Benson-Ames Alliance and Community ReDesigned to facilitate the student-focused design, development and implementation of multiple aspects of a stormwater management project on the grounds of Benson High School. A groundbreaking ceremony for the school's on-site rain garden was held May 12, 2010.

Sustainable Networking Events

- The Benson-Ames Alliance co-hosted a series of sustainable networking events at The Pizza Shoppe Collective in conjunction with Kind Air, Element Distributing and a group of revolving partners.

Benson Farmers Market

- The Benson-Ames Alliance is currently supporting the Benson Farmers Market, which operates each Saturday in downtown Benson from May through September.

Communications

All B-AA communication tools are produced/maintained by Omaha by Design staff, with the exception of www.bensonbeat.com, which was transitioned to community management in December 2010.

- The Benson-Ames Alliance web site, www.benson-ames.org, was launched in May 2007.
- The first issue of *The Bulletin*, the quarterly newsletter of the Benson-Ames Alliance, was published in May 2007. It is stacked free of charge at business and civic outlets throughout the alliance.
- The Cole Creek Project web site, www.colecreek.org, and Twitter site, www.twitter.com/colecreek, were launched in September 2008.
- The Maple Street Corridor Project web site, www.bensonbeat.com, was launched in October 2008. (It was transitioned to community management in December 2010.)
- The Benson-Ames Alliance Facebook page was launched in December 2009.
- The Benson Business Improvement District web page, part of www.benson-ames.org, was launched May 12, 2010.